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# Image of God, image of self

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## COMPILERS COMMENTS

"God is all the colors of all people," responded my seven-year-old daughter as I tucked her into bed. "Someone told me in a song once. Why do you need to know?" How do you see God is a question I have been asking many people in the last few months. I know my own journey of discovery of self, and I know what images of God hold meaning for me, but I have been curious to ask those around me how they image self and God. So much of our life experience plays into how we see ourselves and how we choose to image God. I think we often forget that we have been created wonderfully in the image of God. I was reminded of that recently as we mourned a loss, yet celebrated a life.

Grandpa was kind to everyone, was interested in all those he met, and was for many, imaging God.

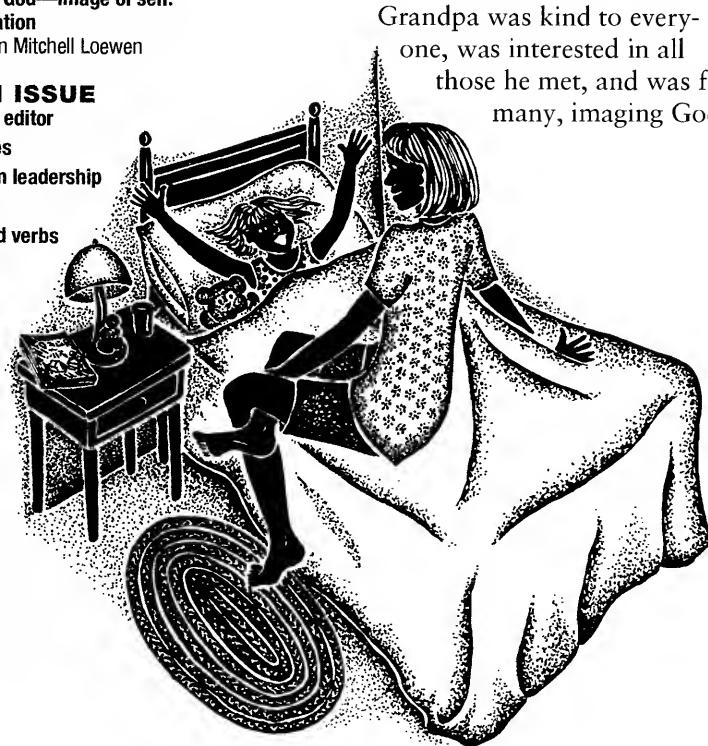
I have felt over these last weeks that I have been walking the road to Emmaus, walking a path of discovery, learning from people how they see themselves and God.

"Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). So it has been as I visited with people over meals, at the hospital, at work. I have been blessed by the images of self and God that have been shared: God as an eagle, soaring on the wind; God as a midwife, assisting in birthings; God as an old man with a long white beard; an imageless image; God as savior; God as protector, mother hen; God as water, cleansing, warming, enfolding, buoyant; God as she. Our life experiences certainly impact us as you will see through what is shared in this issue.

As you spend time reading through the lives and experiences of the following women, my wish for you is that you may find yourself challenged to think of yourself, others, and God in new ways. I invite you to meditate on the stories, search yourself, pamper yourself, reflect, cry, read, share, think in new ways by yourself or in a group. And above all, laugh and celebrate because we are all wonderfully made in God's image, with all the colors.

—compiled by Kathryn Mitchell Loewen

Kathryn Mitchell Loewen is the Women's Network Coordinator for MCC Canada. She and her partner Russell have four children, Andrew, Elizabeth, Anne and Sarah. A Mennonite by choice, Kathryn likes to explore new images of God and self.



## FROM THE

**H**ave you noticed something different? Hopefully it's obvious. *Women's Concerns Report* has been re-designed. *Report* has looked pretty much the same since 1985. It was time for a change. It continues to be simple and flexible. It continues to include drawings by Teresa Pankratz, that so many of you praised in your responses to our questionnaire. But Beth Oberholtzer, with her creativity and expertise, has designed an up-dated and more attractive look.

It seems fitting for us to debut this new design while we ponder the image of God and image of self. The articles in this issue discuss how our self-image changes due to our life experiences and how our image of God grows because of it. So what does it mean that *Report's* image has changed? I hope it means that all of us who share in

this magazine by reading, writing or compiling continue to grow as we hear each other's experiences, thoughts and perspectives. I hope it shows that we are still grounded in what envisioned this periodical: the belief that Jesus Christ teaches the equality of all people and the commitment to seek ways for women and men to grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Also, it should communicate that we have grown because of the many topics that we have addressed throughout the years: power, poverty, inclusive language, singleness, domestic abuse, cancer, forgiveness, abortion, infertility, women in leadership, eating disorders, learning to laugh and so many more. This redesign is an indication that we will continue to grow and learn and that God will continue to reveal herself to us with the topics that are to come.

—edited by Debra Gingerich

# Reflections of God

by Angela Reimer

Angela is in grade 12 at Fort Richmond Collegiate, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She loves reading, writing, and playing the piano. She is a member of Fort Garry Evangelical Mennonite Church, is active in her youth group, and teaches grade three Sunday School. She is looking forward to being a camp counselor this summer.

I have looked at myself in the mirror thousands of times in my life, and each time my appearance has changed slightly. Similarly, each time I perceive God, he looks a little different. As a small child, I heard God called "Father" at church and in the songs we sang, and I took this literally: whenever I tried to picture God, he always had my dad's face. This was a good thing, though, because, as a little kid, I

always thought that my dad was invincible. It made me think of God in the same way. As I got older, I separated the two but I always pictured God as a father who would do anything to protect me and do what was best for me. When I was about twelve or thirteen, I started having the doubts about myself that often accompany adolescence. In junior high, I had a small identity crisis. I became very concerned that I wasn't living up to other people's expectations, and I found it very hard to open up to people because I was afraid of rejection. During this time, I pictured God as a distant, cold figure, since I felt that he wasn't responding to my cries for help. Now that I have matured a little more, I see God as a father but also as a person who will let bad things happen to me if they will strengthen my faith.

Obviously, as a teenage girl, I realize that the media has a lot to say about how I should look, act, and evaluate myself. My self-image is often severely damaged after I watch a TV show or music video filled with women who, often, at my height,

The MCC Committees on Women's Concerns believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing stories, information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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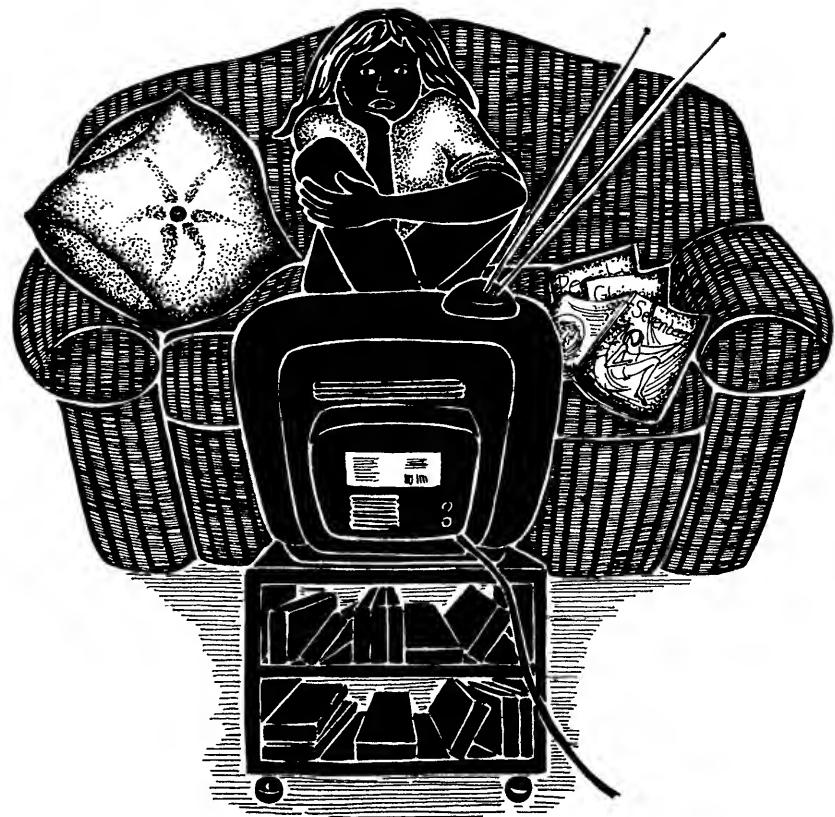
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weigh a good thirty pounds less than I do. At times like this, it's hard to see God as anything other than an unfair old grouch who likes to play cruel tricks on women, e.g. those women who eat Big Macs all day and remain a slender 120 pounds while the less fortunate starve themselves down to 160. However, when

I feel like this, I try to remember that, to God, I am a work of art. I have millions and millions of cells that create millions and millions of chances for something to go wrong, but somehow they have managed to work perfectly non-stop for seventeen years. There is no one in the world who looks exactly like me. I am hand-crafted, not mass-produced.

However, my self-image is not based entirely on my appearance. I also value myself based on my personality, abilities, and the way I relate to other people. Most of the time, I see myself as a smart, kind, funny person. This is a good, healthy self-image. However, since I consider myself a wonderful person, I sometimes feel that I don't need God very much at all. Ironically, it's the times when I feel bad about myself that I really see God as the savior he is. One of my spiritual goals is to be able to see God as he truly is, all the time, not just when I need him to make me feel



better. I know I'll never be able to completely understand God, since nobody can completely understand perfection, but I hope that my image of him will continue to become closer and closer to what he wants me to see. ♦

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## Image reborn

Becoming a mother has certainly changed my image of God and my own identity. In the two years before I became pregnant, I was experiencing a metamorphosis—a grand change—in my spiritual life. The patriarchal and hegemonic faith of my past no longer resonated, but Christianity was still important. I remained in relative limbo until my pregnancy brought me to question how I would raise my child in faith. In this postmodern age of shifting identities—believing in everything yet believing in nothing of the mass marketed banal North American culture focused primarily on consumption with little concern for

social justice—I needed to ground myself. Like a tree, in times of drought, stretches its roots down deeper into the soil, I dug deep into the past. And like a tree sheds its leaves in the fall, I shed old ideas and grew new ones.

By reaching back into my ancestors' heritage of faith, I came to myself. I found my identity in being a Mennonite, and it is from this theology of peace that I built my image of God. For me, it is a protest against the world that wants to mold everyone into its carbon copy image. I also claim this heritage for my child, to

**by Tina Fehr Kehler**

Tina Fehr Kehler is a part-time Master's student in Sociology at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg and a full-time mommy to 16 month old Griffin. She enjoys reading, listening to CBC 990AM, being involved in her church and the wider Mennonite community, and listening to U2.

**My understanding of God began to change before I became pregnant, but the lack of images of God as mother became more acute during pregnancy.**

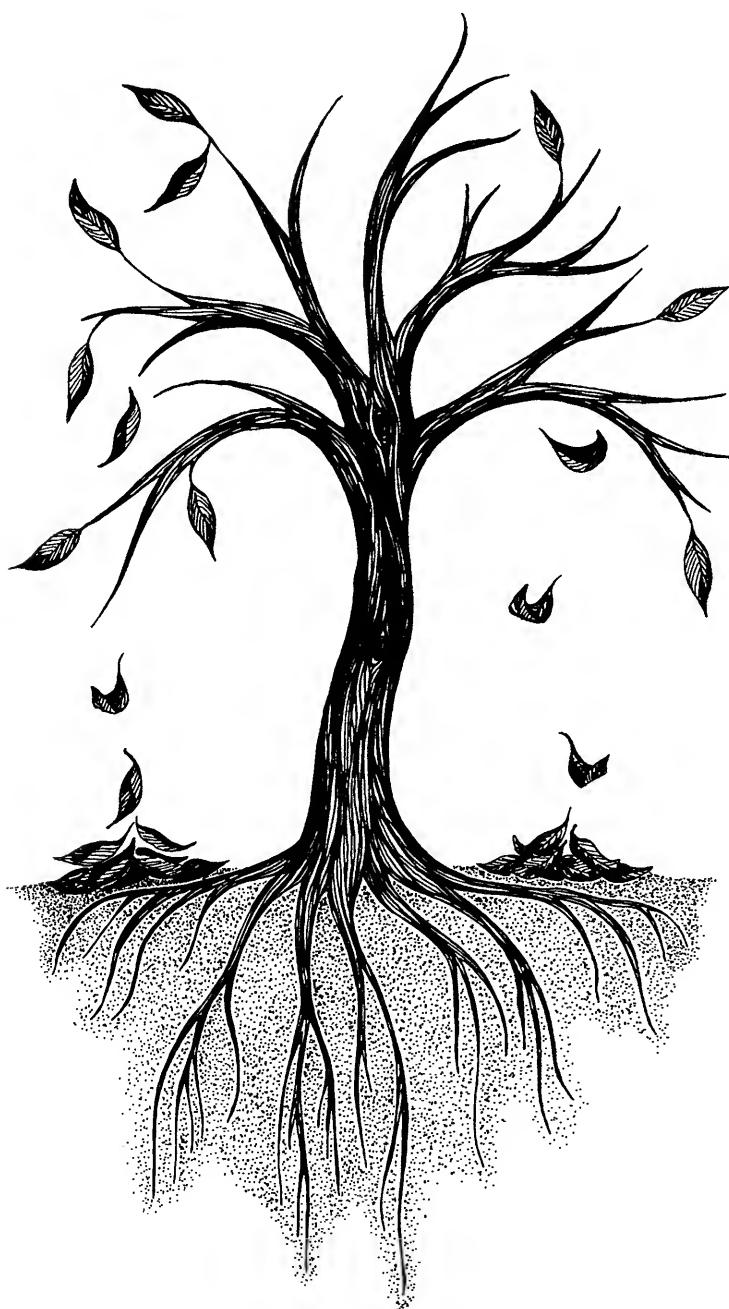
give him roots and a sense of identity and belonging. At the same time, I have come to have a greater appreciation for other expressions of faith and a broader understanding of God.

When I was pregnant, my prayer life was nearly non-existent. The book *Mother-prayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion* by Tikva Frymer-Kensky helped me come back to God with a new understanding. Though much of the goddess imagery did not resonate with me, I

found consolation in the prayers and guides for personal rituals. I created my own ritual. It felt strange at first—very forced—but it helped me to focus, to mark a certain part of the day as sacred, set aside for prayer and meditation. I would light a candle and say a prayer from the book that corresponded to the time of my gestation—my emotional and physical changes. I also prayed for family and friends who would have an impact on my child, and I set aside money as an offering that would buy a tree which I wanted to plant for him as a legacy. Through this book, my image of God and myself expanded while I literally expanded.

The whole idea of creating life, being created in God's image and bearing life within myself, has expanded my image of God and myself. I am created in God's image, I am a woman—it seems only logical that God is female in some aspect of her nature. My understanding of God began to change before I became pregnant, but the lack of images of God as mother became more acute during pregnancy. It has been difficult to change the image of God as a big old man up in the sky, which was imprinted on my mind at an early age. However, new images continue to evolve. It feels more and more comfortable to use "Mother/Father God," but more often I simply use "God" or other adjectives such as Creator, Sustainer, or Provider. I understood myself to be a co-creator with God, a sustainer of life and provider of nourishment in the forming of my child. I became a life-giver. And now as I continue to parent, I continue to give my child life.

As a parent, I see God's relationship with me in a different light. I see it through the eyes of my parenting. Everything was so new and exciting when Griffin was born. My love for him was instant and unconditional; I loved him because he was mine. Everything he has done is amazing—his first smile, laugh and step. I take such joy in teaching him and watching him learn, play, laugh and talk. When he is hurt and crying, I hurt and cry too. My goal is to empower him, that he might love himself and be a life-giver to others. This is how I see God working. ♦



# Made in secret

I was about eleven the first time I went searching for an image of God that was different from the images that pervaded the Baptist sensibilities of my small town church. I did not know why the images found in church did not work, I only knew they did not. It had been a rough year with the death of a grandmother, life-threatening illness of an older sister, and the death of my sister's 16-year-old friend. I needed to find a God who was large enough to be able to accept all my anger and still provide the security I needed in a world that no longer seemed secure. The image I held to was vast and yet close, powerful yet gentle, destructive yet life-giving. It was the image in the wind that danced or whipped around me as I walked to school. It was the image in the sea that is a constant presence to the senses when one lives on the coast. It was an intensely private image, and thus I did not speak of it to anyone. I did wonder why it seemed barred by the doors and windows of the church but was present in scripture. By the time I was ready to ask why, I had figured out that anything other than the image of God as father was suspect, and to find an image of God in the wind or the sea was dangerously close to pagan. So I kept my silence, and when I left my home town after high school to explore past its confines and to explore my image of myself, I found new elements in my image of God.

I did not know how many questions I had until I was free to ask them. University afforded me that freedom. With each new idea I encountered and explored, I left behind a piece of fear of the unknown. My curiosity, my sense of discontent with the unchallenged and the mundane, became an integral part of my self-image. I challenged not only my image of God but the very existence of God. When both my self-image (as a believer) and my image of God survived the challenge, I knew there were no questions too big or too hard to ask. Every possibility and every potential was sanctified with why, why not or what if. God was part of the question as was I. Eventually the questions began to need some answers.

I sought out action rather than intellectual reason. On the advice of a friend, I applied to MCC without knowing much at all about the organization or Mennonites (other than the advice-giving friend). Two years stretched into twenty. And in those twenty years, another image of self and God was formed. The compassion and concern I had felt first for family and then friends became the atmosphere I breathed. This caring was not a piece of self reserved for intimates, and in acknowledging that aspect within myself, I connected to a new (and yet very old) image of God: God immediate, present and involved in the world; God inspiring, motivating, supporting humanity to do and be good; God weeping at the horrors and dancing with the joys of the world.

About ten years ago I began writing and the image of myself as a creative person, previously somewhat peripheral, took on a central focus. Initially the writing was therapeutic, to deal with betrayal and loss. With my need for some theological answers combined with an interest in story, I began to re-write the stories of biblical women from their perspectives. As I look over the writing now, I realize how much I was exploring the image of God for myself by using their voices. I returned to the question of why the traditional church taught images of God that did not work for me. As I explored the images these women had of themselves, I began to understand how connected one's image of God is to one's image of self. Sarah's image of God could not be the same as Hagar's, Rachel's image of God could not be the same as Leah's. But each was valid.

For the most part I received support for my writing, but the occasional misunderstanding or condemnation was a reminder that exploring a personal image of God was suspect when it stepped outside of

**by CM Kathleen Hull**

CM Kathleen Hull is a displaced maritimer living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She is finishing a Religious Studies degree at the University of Winnipeg while working part time as a fund-raising event assistant for the Laurel Center. She is a contemporary art quilt artist and writer.

**And as I explored the image these women had of themselves, I began to understand how connected one's image of God is to one's image of self. Sarah's image of God could not be the same as Hagar's, Rachel's image of God could not be the same as Leah's. But each was valid.**



tradition. Personalizing too much was tantamount to creating an image of God based not on God but on yourself. In preparing for this article, I discovered a rather rough and raw poem reacting to such criticism. Undisciplined and without editing or re-writing I remember the emotion of its creation, but now something of it speaks to me of my own uncertainties and fears of embracing what comes next.

If I dance before God  
in celebration or sorrow  
with movements expressing  
praise or healing  
will you avert your eyes  
calling it too sensual. . .  
a shameful exhibition

If I celebrate  
my woman-ness  
body mind and soul  
that cycles according to God's  
creation  
will you demand secrecy  
with dry dogma

If I pray in words or images  
that are ancient or foreign  
searching past the familiar  
to expand understanding  
will you silence the spirit  
and complain the  
pagan din drowns  
the voice of God

If I claim my strength  
in God who names  
all creation good  
seeking to fulfill my own gifts  
naming what I create as good  
will you call me proud or vain  
or reject it if it does not fit  
into your own  
inspiration

I am again in university. I have left the workplace of MCC and its community and daily support. The desire to create both with words and fabric is constant. I have mourned the loss of my 30-year-old body and am learning to celebrate a 40 plus body with all the cycles of change to come. I am looking forward with nervous expectation to discover new images of myself in a future that has no definition. The image of God I carry with me has the vastness of my first image. It also holds untold questions and a deep sense of compassion. It is filled with the joy and frustration of creativity. It holds none of my own self-fears. Most of all my image of God is potential. What I do not know of myself, I do not know yet—but it is known by God.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
Psalm 139: 13–16b ♦

# Getting to know God by getting to know yourself

**A**s a child, I understood the image of God we were presented with to be male, remote and authoritative. It wasn't an image I was aware needed change until the feminist movement began to open my eyes. Suddenly it seemed impossible to worship a male God when women and children were being abused and the connection was being made between God being male, and males feeling and acting as though they were God-like. It caused an upheaval in my life that I struggle with to this day. How do we change something that has been instilled in us almost by osmosis? I was in my forties, almost half way through life, when I tried to change my automatic responses.

At midlife I slipped into a lengthy period of depression. During that time I decided to do a clean sweep of male God imagery. I would not see, speak or write about God using male gender. But my automatic responses were well ingrained—it seemed an impossible task. So I tossed out anything religious. I was mad at the world anyway, why not include God? I quit going to church. I hunkered down into my restrictions and waited. Meanwhile I was "given" books, "led to" might say it better. From Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* to many Joseph Campbell books, I was on a journey of discovering myself and the Awesome One.

Discovering myself was vital. Depression is an expression of self-hatred, often a sign of skewed responses to life and an overly zealous inner critic. *Original Blessing* was a life saver. Everyday I sat with it and the dictionary, ploughing through difficult passages, knowing somehow this study was of utmost importance. There I found that darkness is a blessing, a place of new and renewed life. Imagine being in abject despair, already planning the ultimate escape, and being told that your depression is a blessing! The feelings of being validated, and the "aha" moments were manna to my feelings of worthlessness and starving self-esteem.

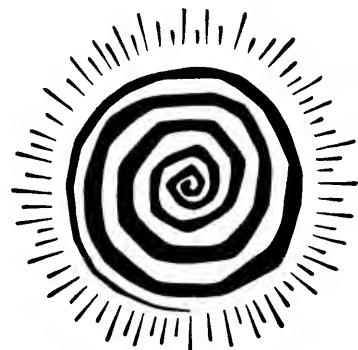
The journey led on, through many books and through several years. All this time I had a sense that somewhere my banished God was watching, knowing. Poetry happened, feelings compressed into words.

## Depression

the bottom falls out  
and still I plum the depths  
a certain element of curiosity  
a part of this unhappy state  
where are its edges  
how far can I go  
how far can I go without losing something irretrievable  
without adding a burden  
to an already burdensome life  
how many times do I start again  
simplifying the options and resolutions  
only to wake again  
to the pitiless feeling of hopelessness  
the joy of life gone  
they say out of deep depression  
comes new life, new maturity,  
new plateaus  
with that glimmer of hope I wait  
with patience  
refashioning my concepts of money, of time  
of joy and celebration of life  
with heavy tread walking away from my old religion  
jam-packed with people who are so sure  
refashioning my concept of Energy Blessing Light  
reaching deep inside and reaching out out out

by Winona Rempel

Winona Rempel lives with her husband Bill in Winnipeg. She currently occupies her time creating, reading, and mothering cats. She served as a lay-minister in her church and continues to find herself serving in the lives of people through weddings and funerals.



It was a time spent not in vain. My own image has become connected to everything on earth and the cosmos. My God is everything and everywhere. How can one sort it out, except that one has this awareness. Presence. Always. Everywhere. ♦

**All this time I had a  
sense that somewhere  
my banished God was  
watching, knowing.**

# Who is It?

by Michelle E. Armster

Michelle E. Armster is the director of Mennonite Conciliation Service. She moved from Dallas, Texas, to central Pennsylvania to work for Mennonite Central Committee U.S. about two years ago. Until the move, she was active on the anti-racism team of the Greater Dallas Community of Churches. She lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania with her three cats—Diva, Isis and Coco.

In her one-woman show, Ellen DeGeneres imagines her meeting with God. She arrives at God's home and is greeted at the door by God. She describes God as a black woman about 40–50 years old. God invites her in and offers her a glass of Chablis. Although I can't remember her monologue verbatim, I can remember being intrigued that her image of God was so similar to mine. However, I have not always had that image of God.

Growing up as an African American female within the conventions of mainstream protestant religious understanding, the image of God was prescribed without discussion, discourse or disagreement. God was white, male and the conveyor of punishment. Sunday School materials, religious children's books and even the Sunday bulletin always pictured this white God with his white hand outreached to white people. It's ironic that in the United States, a country founded and built on

racism and exclusion, God was not only a white man but also a white man to be feared—an image of a person that I knew could not be trusted, revered or loved. This sinister injection of the image of God into the understanding of who God is, is for many an image of oppression.

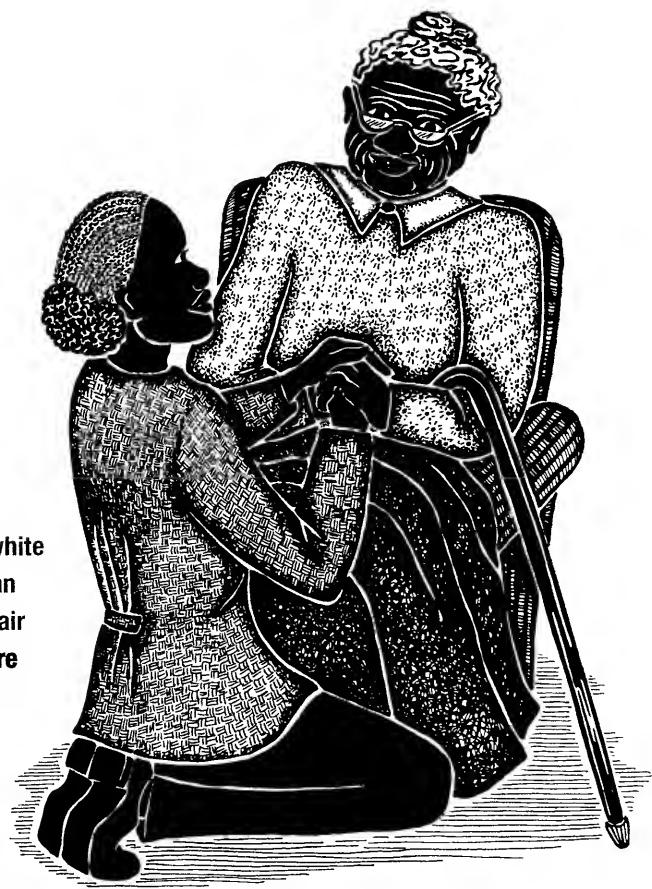
Yet the minister would expound and wax about a loving God, with us as his children. But this was not a God that I could trust. What could/would a white man do to and for me? To go to God, trust in God and rely on God was abuse, an action of sadomasochism. It would be insane to trust a being whose shape was an image of oppression and whose self-interest was in direct opposition to mine.

Now, the image of Jesus was less fraught with internal conflict. In spite of the renderings that appear in mainstream churches, the fact that Jesus is a Jew negated any blonde hair, blue-eyed images. It didn't make "good sense" that Jesus, a middle easterner, would look anything like the church murals, Easter passion plays or Christmas pageants. Jesus was not a white man. He was a man whose features, hair and skin color were more like mine.

This bifurcating of God and Jesus contributed to a painful faith journey. Secretly, I developed my own hermeneutics. Based on my understanding of scriptural readings and teachings, the road to salvation was through a relationship, understanding and acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. Therefore, since I must go through Jesus to God—in order for my prayers to be heard—then I would trust and believe in Jesus and hope that God would listen.

The struggle to believe and the struggle to belong have been at the core of the dilemma for me as a woman of color. To believe in God, I had to redefine who God is and was for me. When I was first given the assignment to share how/what I understood God to be and how/what I needed God to be, all the fundamentalist mainstream religious understandings were challenged. It was at a time in my life when to

**Jesus was not a white man. He was a man whose features, hair and skin color were more like mine.**



die or be struck dead would have been a welcomed relief. So I engaged in the exercise and began a journey towards God. The most pivotal influence was the dying and death of my Grandmother. She was a person who loved me unconditionally. She was always clear about our family values and she was clear that she had standards. But she was also honest about her struggles and assured her constant presence regardless of how far I wandered off the desired path. When she died, it felt like God had died. Later, I realized that through her, I had experienced the presence of God.

Kahlil Gibran has written, "Most religions speak of God in the masculine gender. To me, he is as much a mother as he is a father. He is both the father and mother in one; and woman is the God-mother. The God-father may be reached through the mind or the imagination. But the God-mother can be reached through the heart only—through love."

Like Kahlil, I struggle with the "he" of God. But in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie writes to her sister Nettie about the conversation she and Shug have about God and what God looks like. Shug concludes that "God ain't a he or a she, but a It . . . It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It."

As I search for what It is, I know what It is not—It is not white; It is not male. It is the Creator; It is the presence of my Grandmother; It is the laugh of a child; It is the assurance of being and feeling loved; It is the sacrifice of Jesus; It is the touch of a friend; It is the All in life. ♦

**The struggle to believe and the struggle to belong are at the core of the dilemma for me as a woman of color. To believe in God, I had to redefine who God is and was for me.**

## A God of impossibilities

**M**y conception of God is largely the one I've inherited from my mother. The God with whom I have become familiar is a God of love and of justice but also a very creative God, a God of impossibilities. I figure that if God can create the universe with a single breath, there has to be something he can use me for.

This understanding of God has served me well in my life, where living with my disability means having constant restrictions placed on me, whether it be through structural barriers or the attitudinal barriers that give way to the structural barriers. My understanding of God has allowed me to see that these barriers can (at least to some degree) be overcome.

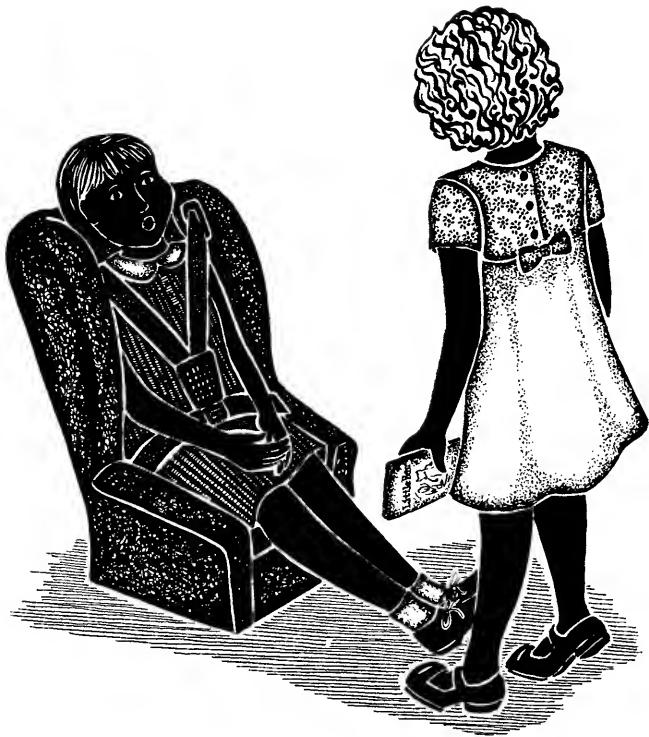
I was brought into the world three months too early on January 15, 1979 in a hospital in Loma Plata, Chaco, Paraguay. Natu-

rally, my chances of survival were lessened since some form of brain damage usually accompanies the lives of premature infants. My mother was greeted with the diagnosis that I probably wouldn't live and so not to get too attached. Well, my mother being the same determined woman at fifteen as she is today, decided she wasn't going to give up that easily. The apple didn't fall far from the tree apparently, for my mother tells me that I was most easily distinguishable from the other infants in the ward by my loud screams, while the other infants lay placid and non-resistant. Those same placid, non-resistant infants later died while I survived. While I'm more than willing to attribute my survival to divine Providence, I'm firmly convinced that my fighting instinct had been, and still is, my greatest survival skill.

**by Gladiola Kehler**

Gladiola Kehler is a graduate of the University of Winnipeg and is currently working towards a Bachelor of Theology at Canadian Mennonite University. She is interested in pursuing social work in the area of rehabilitation counseling. In her spare time, she likes to write.

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Despite the fact that I survived, I did not escape my premature entrance into the world unscathed. For the first years of my life, my parents were plagued by the unnerving suspicion that all was "not right" with me, and I was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy at the age of three.

This eventually lead my parents to move to Canada (and the fact that my dad had an "itch") because they had heard that there were resources available which would help me and that life would be better for me here. Thus began the sojourn that brought me to Winnipeg, Manitoba in August of 1983 at the age of four.

As I was young and a quick learner, I learned English before I started school the following year. The school environment brought with it its own challenges, particularly as I did not have a wheelchair at the time (I was put in a car seat), and I had to live with the presence of kids who always approached me with their questions. The kids usually fell into two camps: those who envied me with comments like "you're lucky, you get to sit in a chair all day" and those who pitied me. Although I sometimes indulged in the occasional bout of self-pity, I didn't appreciate either reaction coming from someone else. There was also the name-calling to deal with. When I

**Physical healing, I believe, is never an end in itself but rather the means to an end, an end that points to something greater than us.**

had difficulty coping with it, I was just told to ignore it—a nearly impossible task for a sensitive child.

Needless to say my challenges have progressed beyond those experienced in childhood. I have discovered that although this is the case, the older one becomes, the more resources one acquires to deal with various problems. I find it somewhat odd that my life has consisted of being plunked into various situations and being told implicitly to "just cope." How? There was no coping manual for this sort of thing. Moreover, I felt a certain resentment towards those who offered me well-meaning advice but didn't have to experience my situation for themselves on a daily basis. They could go home at the end of the day and live "normal" lives.

As a young woman, I continue to be plagued by public misconceptions about people with disabilities. People will at times raise their voices when addressing me, as if I'm a few I.Q. points short of normal intelligence. The logic follows that if something is wrong with my body, there must be something wrong with my mind as well. Or if I'm struggling, a myriad of people will rush to my aid, assuming that I'm in need of their assistance. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the help that many strangers have given me, however I still am the best judge of what I am, and am not, capable of doing. People's sense of charity is instilled in them when they see me, and their intuitive sense may be to offer me money or to save my soul - I have been approached by various individuals belonging to religious groups. Charity is all well and good but not at the expense of an individual's dignity. Pity, which is the emotion that most often instills charity, is the most destructive thing that can be conferred upon a human being—it is a very subtle way of reinforcing the recipient's status as a "lesser" human being.

This idea that people with a form of physical or mental disability are somehow "lesser" beings is subtly infiltrated and widespread in our culture. I am aware of it every time I hear stories of assisted suicide being requested by individuals who feel that they are no longer useful; or a certain parent getting a more lenient sentence for taking the life of a disabled child on the grounds that their suffering (the

parent's or the child's?) was unbearable. While I can understand that line of reasoning, and I am well aware of the presence of suffering, I always wonder what kind of message we are sending about the worth of the lives of marginalized human beings.

I am again aware of this when an individual receives an injury which leads to a permanent disability and is convinced that God will heal them. Yes, God does have the power to heal, but healing occurs on many different levels, not just the physical. Physical healing, I believe, is never an end in itself but rather the means to an end, an end that points to something greater than us. Very often, I believe, when people find themselves in a position of vulnerability—such as disability—they enforce their will onto God and invert it to be representative of God's will. When people ask for physical healing, I often wonder if they would be equally willing to accept the spiritual healing that accompanies it.

My understanding of my relationship with God means that I do not have to be physically healed for God's power to be manifest in me, as long as I choose to be a willing instrument of God. Being a willing instrument of God, to me, means being an instrument of God's love and justice, being an instrument that empowers rather than oppresses. As a result my disability has become the source of my life's meaning and purpose. It has revealed God's omnipotence to me in a way that might not have been possible otherwise. It has revealed to me the knowledge that God is limitless in God's capacity to create, employ, and redeem every human life. To deny that would be an insult to God. If I, through my disability, have instilled in people a bigger vision of God, and consequently of the world and their place in it, then my struggles will have been worth it. ♦

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## God's embrace

The youngest of my three children has autism. Before my son's diagnosis, the only thing I knew about autism came from watching the movie *Rain Man*. Autism is a complicated developmental disability that affects individuals in different ways. It is characterized by impairment in social interaction and communication, and by restricted and repetitive interests and behaviors. It is not known what causes autism, so there is great debate over the best treatment.

As soon as my son was diagnosed, I began to research autism and the many different treatment options that were available. It was overwhelming and confusing. This experience began to affect how I saw myself; I began to have feelings of inadequacy as a mother. I felt like a competent parent to my two older typical children, but I was in uncharted territory parenting a child with autism. Having a child with a disability made me feel cut off from my friends with typical children because I was ashamed of the difficult time I was having.

To the outside world I'm sure I seemed to be coping, but I felt like an imposter.

I had often heard that parents of children with disabilities have to advocate for their children. The idea made me cringe. Like a lot of people, I had this impression of parents of children with disabilities as a cut above regular parents, noble crusaders, and champions of the under-dog. When I actually began to connect with other parents of autistic children, I saw that they were just like me. Our situation does not make us heroic because we are caring for a child with a disability. We are simply parents who love our children, and like every parent, we take care of them.

Waiting lists for services are a harsh reality. We waited for six months for an aide in preschool, and we waited for almost a year to receive speech and occupational therapies. During that time, I came across an intensive behavioral program that I believed would be good for my son. By the

**by Anne Barber-Somers**

Anne Barber-Somers lives with her husband, Kent, in Winnipeg. She is very involved in the lives of all three of her children.

**I felt like a competent parent to my two older typical children, but I was in uncharted territory parenting a child with autism.**

I feel assured in my love for my son. His actions say what his words cannot; he sparkles, and I know that he feels the richness of love and life.



time my son began to receive speech therapy and occupational therapy, I had become both an informed consumer and an effective advocate on his behalf. My love for my child, it turns out, surpassed any fear or reluctance I had to speak out about what was best for him.

My son currently attends nursery school in the mornings, and we run a home-based behavioral program in the afternoons. Intensive therapy has made an enormous difference in his life. This program has also given me the gift of confidence in my role as his parent. I have the support of my

spouse, my extended family, my church family, my son's tutors, and my friends. This road has been a long one, but I see it as a spiritual journey filled with joy as well as pain. I no longer see myself as an incompetent parent. I do my best every day for my child. I have even been able to offer my help and support to other parents.

I used to look at people with disabilities and wonder if God had abandoned them. I wondered if they could feel love when they could not tell others about it. I wondered about my own capacity to love or if I would merely lapse into pity. I know differently now. I feel assured in my love for my son. His actions say what his words cannot; he sparkles, and I know he feels the richness of love and life. While I confess that I cannot know yet if he is aware of God embracing him, I know there is a moment of grace when I enfold him in my arms.

When I love my children, I know I am called into a role that God has taken with me. I am invited to see God as endlessly patient with a large, powerful, yearning love for me. God is the mother who draws me to her breast, who weeps at my sorrow, who offers me comfort, who laughs with me in joy. Despite my imperfections, I know God rejoices with me; despite my son's disability, there is joy and love in our lives. ♦

## Image of God and the abused person

by Judi Snowdon

Judi Snowdon works for MCC Canada as co-representative for the Maritimes Program. She is a musician and published composer of choral and piano music. She enjoys swimming, cycling and sewing. She has a dog named Patsy and is married to Tom.

*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* Gen. 1:27 (NRSV)

**H**uman beings are a living theology, a revelation and representation of God. In the Genesis 2 account of the creation, we are told that ". . . the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (Gen. 2:7) According to Hebrew tradition,

to breath into another's face was an act of deepest symbolism, and in doing so, something very inwardly yours was transmitted into the other person's being or spirit. The very essence of life that God breathed into the first human being was sacred, the divine image of God that is in each one of us. But, do we always see that image in ourselves and in others?

I grew up in a faith tradition that stressed the total depravity of all people: we were innately sinful and could not help ourselves except by salvation through Jesus.

As a small child I sat through many sermons, Sunday School classes and children's meetings which reiterated that theme. It only caused me to be filled with fear and shame. The picture of Jesus hanging on my bedroom wall so terrified me at night that my mother had to remove it. I did "get saved" at the age of six, but I had no one to teach me about the beauty of being human or God's unconditional love. I did learn that children were to be seen and not heard and were, at all times, to be obedient to adults.

So, when I was eight years old and began to be sexually abused by a man from our church, I was already conditioned to believe that I was bad, perhaps deserved it, and that it was even my fault. Whatever image of God I might have seen in myself and others was even further obscured by deep shadows of fear and shame.

Victims of abuse, especially child victims, are forced into a very dark world. They suffer an extreme violation of the body and soul which destroys values, boundaries and trust. It is a devious evil attempt to strike at the heart of who we are as human beings, at the very image of God.

Some would have called me a resilient child. I did survive but not always very well. I lived my life with as much integrity and vitality as I could. But there was always something wrong. Carolyn Holder-read Heggen states it very well: "Most adult survivors of abuse have put such emotional energy into mere day-to-day survival that until they begin therapy they are unaware of the ongoing effects of their childhood abuse. Instead, victims may have a sense of vague anxiety, or generalized emotional pain and sadness that permeates everything they do. . ." (*Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, p.28)

Most of all, I couldn't see God. I couldn't feel God. I felt alone and abandoned. God's image was removed from my awareness. I couldn't feel God's love. I only felt shame of who I was.

Healing for victims of childhood abuse can be very difficult in the faith setting. When the perpetrator of the abuse is religious, it can be even more difficult. The man who abused me said that he had not been a Christian at the time of the abuse. Since that time he had had a conversion experience and had been forgiven. I was the problem since I had not forgiven him. His pastor agreed. This only increased my guilt.

As I began the journey of healing from the pain of sexual abuse, I also began a quest to find God. Where had God been during my pain, where was God now? My husband was a great source of strength and encouragement. Through him, I saw God's unconditional love and support. This gave me courage to seek further. But I encountered many roadblocks, from the church community, from individuals, and from the church leadership as I sought healing and reconciliation. I became badly revictimized. I began to look for God in my own heart.

I think my most powerful revelation was early in my healing journey. I was lying on my bed, praying and crying, as I did so many times. Just as vividly as if he were standing in the room, Jesus was there. He was surrounded by a soft, warm, yellow light. I was a little girl, with braids flying in the air, running into his arms.

continued on page 14

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He picked me up, swung me around, and held me with such love and tenderness. He held me tight, and I heard the words, “You have always been in my arms, and every time you were abused, so was I; every time you were hurt, so was I.” I will never forget that moment.

Healing is hard work that is always ongoing. I don’t think it will ever be over in this life. I have learned that in order to see God, I must look inside myself, at my yearnings for goodness, for a world without sin and violence, for a world that is just and pure. These very longings come from God within me. My quest for God was that very breath of the Spirit calling me to herself. ♦

## Pieces of treasured comfort

The author chooses to remain anonymous.

**A**s an adult, I do not yet know how to speak about things such as images of God and images of self. But if I imagine myself as a child, my imagination flourishes and I can play. I am naive. I do not need to be perceived as mature and insightful. I have no limits or boundaries. My inner critic and my artistic blocks have not yet taken hold. Here there are no expectations of theological expertise. Here is where I will stay while I heal.

There came a time when I was too tired and too weary to continue carrying around my heavy baggage of self-loathing. I began to examine my relationship with my Creator. I looked in the mirror and verbalized exactly what I thought God would say to me if we were face to face. The language was devastating. What I heard was “you are pathetic,” “you make me sick,” “get out of my sight,” “you are worthless,” “I am so disappointed in you,” “you are a mistake.” Wow. Where did that come from? I had no idea that this was in me. No wonder I had been existing in a continual web of self-destructive behavior since adolescence. What else had I deposited in my self-image file? The answers seemed to come from all sorts of people in my life. Again, the language was devastating. This is what I heard: “You are lazy, selfish, fat, weird, negative, distant, mean, skinny, cold, self-centered.”

It was not possible for me to give or receive love if I continued to define myself in those terms. I desired a blank slate, one that believed in the completeness of the following sentence. I am. That is all, I am.

My first step was to create a new image of that which created me. I realized the absurdity of the notion that God could love everyone on earth except me. What if God loved me in the same way that I received love from a few special friends—unconditionally, warts and all? I imagined very loving words coming from my Creator. I cried joyfully. My tears felt like melting ice. I felt myself opening up and letting in something healthy.

Over the past few years, I have acquired several new images of God. Each one has a different quality that I need to draw upon. Some have come from good friends, some have come from children, some seem to have been born from nothing at all. I have a young friend who still keeps tiny pieces of his baby blanket tucked away in special places in his room and in various pockets of his clothing. When he is upset or just needs comfort in some way, he discreetly finds his way to one of these worn out pieces of fabric. If he senses that you need some comforting, he will give you one of his treasured pieces. My images of God feel much like that. They are tucked away in safe places for me to retrieve when I need them.



My first treasures came from imagining God with each of my five senses. With my eyes, I am humbled by the color red, deep and rich. With my ears, I am stilled by the steady rhythm and harmony of many drums. With my bare skin, I am wrapped in the softest of soft furs. With my nose, I inhale the clarity of the smell of an orange. With my mouth, I taste the comfort of mashed potatoes.

Next I needed a God who I could talk to. Could I talk to a male image of God? Could I break away from the male image of God? Apparently, not yet. However, what did emerge was a most effeminate image of this male God. Here I found understanding and empathy. Here I found kinship. Here was the God that I could cry with.

The next image of God came from a friend. She described the God she knew as hilarious with an extremely dry and ironic sense of humor. This image was life altering for me. I could hardly believe that it

was possible for God to be funny, but for awhile I simply pretended that it was so. I imagined God laughing and smiling. I had never imagined a happy God. To me God had always been sad, gloomy, depressed, downtrodden, and just downright blue. It seemed as though any joy in my life was completely separate from my experience with God. I began to see challenging situations through humor. There were many quite miserable moments when I thought that this could actually be quite funny in the hands of an expert comedian. It was pure pleasure to imagine God laughing out loud at something that was giving me grief. It has helped me to not take life or myself so seriously. This image has moved me closer to joy than anything else.

At some point, I became aware that none of my images of God reflected the power of God, the hugeness of the King of the universe. How could I love and fear the very same image? I found my answer in the image of a lion named Aslan. Aslan is found in the pages of the Narnia series of children's books created by C.S. Lewis. I

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was able to identify with the extreme contrasts in this character. Aslan was at first “bigger and more beautiful and more brightly golden and more terrible than he had thought” and yet “what he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life . . . great shining tears stood in the Lion’s eyes . . . . The lion drew a deep breath, stooped its head even lower and gave him a Lion’s kiss. And at once (he) felt that new strength and courage had gone into him.” The children in these stories fear the large and ferocious Lion and yet cannot wait to be in its presence again. It is Aslan’s love which points to the vastness of this Lion’s power.

It is from this particular image that I have come to understand one of life’s lessons. I had heard that when someone talks about you, it says more about that person than you. I never really understood this. I took most images of myself from other people and deposited them into my self-image. Recently someone tried to make a deposit into the “you are so selfish” file. I kept wondering why. Then I remembered the children in the land of Narnia. They were always asking Aslan what plans there were for other people. Aslan explained that no one will hear the story of another. The information delivered to us will only be about our own story. So now, when someone tries to hand me a negative image and I want to know why, I remember that I cannot know the answer to that question. It is not part of my story. Even though my name is in it, it is not about me. People try to define you all the time. They try to give away their pain, but you don’t have to take it.

Most recently I found myself in need of an image for the Holy Spirit. I was trying to come up with an idea or image to paint. I looked inside and saw myself as an eagle flying over the Grand Canyon looking and looking for one single diamond. I had amazing eagle vision, but there was no way that I could find the diamond on my own. I was completely dependent on a gust of wind to blow around the earth and expose the diamond. I felt simultaneously vulnerable and peaceful. I have a lot of work to do there in the Grand Canyon, but I am not alone. I need to trust in something other than myself. So now I will fly and believe that all things will be exposed in due time.

It is Sunday morning of the Thanksgiving weekend. During the church service we are asked to think about what we are grateful for. I am astounded at what pops into my mind. I am so grateful for being exactly who I am, all of it. I am so grateful for my mind where I can have such a good time without even going anywhere. As mixed up as it is, and as exhausting as it can be, I wouldn’t want it any other way. I am so grateful for being all of those things that frustrate me so much. How did this happen? It seems that by changing my image of God, I have created a new image of myself—one that I can live with and one that wants to live. *I am*, is my complete sentence. ♦

## Un-Named

In these walls it lingers  
like a wandering soul:  
    the incense of bodies  
    where death mixes with life.

I vomit

    at the sight of a  
    dead mother's child  
and cry  
    at the thought of  
    this motherless life  
    that now lies  
unclaimed  
unowned  
unloved.

Touch

    is a dangerous thing so  
I love  
through my presence  
    my voice my  
    eyes—  
it's all that I have  
to fall on my knees  
and plead for a blessing  
for this  
motherless child.

by Corinne Peters

Corinne Peters is presently working as an administrative assistant for MCC Manitoba. She spent one year in Zambia with SALT working as a nutrition assistant in a rural BIC Mission Station hospital and as a counselor in a YWCA women's shelter. These poems articulate the reality of her experience.

*Un-Named* was written based on Corrine's first impressions on her first day at the hospital.

*Her Self* came out of her work in the shelter. It is based mostly on the life of one women but is also a compilation of many other women's experiences.

## Her Self

Her self subdued by fists and fits of rage.  
Pestles limbs pound her body bones skin  
to the floor like the fetus within her.  
Is a woman's 'place' the grave—your bed, or  
a hospital bed?  
tearing skin bleeding,  
bearing children healing  
nursing  
wounds and infants,  
milking her soul while chipping away at her bones.  
Her self  
somewhere a pit within her breast,  
still the seed of life though drying,  
dying,  
decomposing into cuts and bruises  
on the well worn, parafinned concrete floor.



# **Image of God image of self**

## **A celebration**

by Kathryn Mitchell Loewen

(PREPARATION: In the center of the room, prepare a table with candles.)

GATHERING: We gather in this circle, young, middle-age, crone. Each bringing the gift of ourselves, the sacred, created in the image of God. Welcome. Look around the room at the faces beside and across from us. Turn to one another, and spend time welcoming one another, acknowledging the divine in each of us.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am an image of God.

INVOCATION: Creative One, Thoughtful God, Wise Spirit, you bring us together to celebrate that each of us is a gift of your sacred creation. Together in this community, we are conscious of your presence, blessing us through ourselves and each other. In this holy place, as we contemplate the Divine within, be with us in celebration of your Spirit in each of us. Amen.

QUESTION: When do I image God? Response by all: You image God.

(Invite participants to think of a way that they image God.)

LEADER: Remember that you are created in God's image. . . . (Response)

OTHERS: When I rock my child . . . (Response)

When I rejoice in a sunset . . . (Response)

When I challenge church structure . . . (Response)

When I share my gifts . . . (Response)

When I work for a more just world . . . (Response)

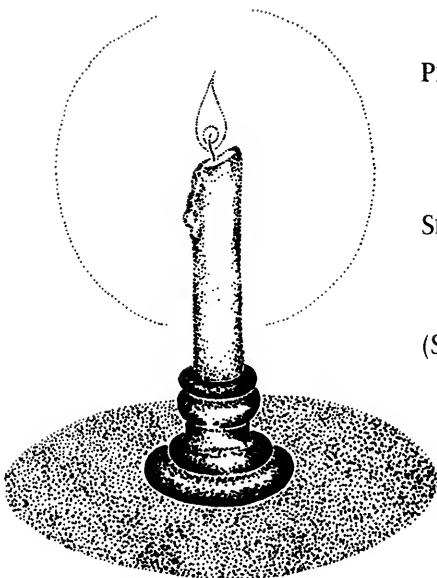
Spend some time remembering those around you who have exemplified God for you. Someone who shared her/his wisdom with you, who nurtured you, who saw pain and despair and offered comfort and hope.

As you light a candle, for the divine light that is within yourself, speak your name. The rest respond with "You are created in the image of God." Share how you image God.

PRAYER: Great God. You are mother, rock, and fortress. You carry us on your wings, and you let us fly alone. You are wet-nurse and mid-wife. You are wisdom and peace. We are blessed by the many ways we can experience You, through our own being and through one another. We celebrate your creative wisdom. Amen.

SENDING: Let us go forth from this place with courage. For we are beautifully made in the image of God. Let us go forth, recognizing the Sacred One in all living beings, for we all are created in the image of God.

(Share together in a feast of celebration for the many images of God.) ◆



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## Women in leadership

**Lois Coleman Neufeld** has been named director of Canadian programs for MCC Canada. Lois and her husband Rob most recently lived in Lusaka, Zambia, where she directed MCC's work in Zambia. She assumed her new position at the MCC office in Winnipeg on May 7, 2001.

Jennifer deGroot, who finished a Youth Internship Program term with MCC Canada last year, has accepted the position of project manager for the United Nations Platform for Action Committee in Manitoba. In this position, she will be promoting economic literacy for women.

REGARDING THE CONCERN EXPRESSED BY Rev. Douglas about my article in last summer's *Report*, I recognize that Rev. Douglas and I disagree, as many have through the centuries, about what is truly Christian. I respect the concerns he has raised. I think that we see through different parts of the kaleidoscope.

Here is my understanding: most Christians celebrate Christmas, the New Year, Easter, and Thanksgiving. All of these holidays/holy days have non-Christian roots. Christians, like other groups, have adapted holy days to serve our beliefs. If we only celebrate holidays that have their origin in Christianity, I'm not sure we would have any to celebrate. Perhaps the primary difference between the views Rev. Douglas and I hold is that I find much

inspiration from non-Christian traditions and he may not.

I don't expect celebrations of the seasonal cycles to become major Christian holidays, but I do hope we use more rituals based on creation. I do not see these celebrations as anti-Jesus; in fact, I think he rejoices when we pay attention to the world we are a part of! The people with whom I worship do not worship nature, but we do see the hand of the Creator mightily and imaginatively at work in the cycles of creation, and we are in awe. I'm reminded of a song that says it so well: "O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made . . . then sings my soul, how great Thou art."

**Yours truly,**  
**Karla Kauffman**

## LETTERS

**Editor's note:** In agreement with our goal to offer a place for dialogue between women within the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches, we invite letters from readers that speak to the issues raised and the perspectives presented in *Report*. Although we try to print all letters, they may be shortened or edited to fit available space. All letters must be signed, although writers may request to have their names withheld.

# NEWS VERBS

## WOMEN'S CONCERN REPORT

### Looking Forward

#### SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2001

Domestic violence  
(Spanish/English issue)



#### NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2001

Women and homelessness



#### JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2002

Women in Zimbabwe



#### MARCH-APRIL 2002

Barriers to women  
in leadership

**MCC Global Family** in India invited the mothers of sponsored children to a mothers' picnic. Including mothers, drivers and MCC staff, there were 22 people who spent the afternoon playing games, getting to know one another and relaxing from their usual busy schedule. The success of the event has convinced MCC India to start saving for another outing. MCC India also plans to meet with the mothers to discuss how they can begin to save for their own futures.

With the vision of Delfina Cuevas and facilitation of Pauline Aguilar, West Coast MCC Quilt Coordinator, a group of nearly 20 women from **El Faro Mennonite Brethren Church** of Reedley, California are meeting weekly to pray and tie comforters together. Their goals are to spend time together, pray and share concerns with each other, and piece comforters for MCC. Their first comforters were sold at the Spring 2001 relief sale in Fresno, while others will go directly to overseas relief. ♦

**Hibiscus MOMS** (Morning Out for Mothers), a parenting group co-founded by MCC Jamaica worker Marci Loewen, was recently featured in the center spread of the Jamaica's *Daily Observer* newspaper. This group offers encouragement for stay-at-home moms. MOMS is a place for them to share their feelings and problems.

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